DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 834 CS 207 017

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TITLE The Fear of Lying: Examining a Source of Bias for PR Students in an Ethics Course.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (65th, Athens, OH, July 25-28, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Credibility; Ethical Instruction; *Ethics; Higher Education; *Journalism Education; *Public Relations; *Textbook Bias; Textbook Content; *Textbook Research

ABSTRACT

A 1981 survey of public relations teachers revealed two primary ethical concerns of their students: relationships with employers or clients and deliberate distortion of information. A study analyzed nine textbooks and three books of selected readings to determine the extent to which they exposed students to the concept of the public relations "flack" as a purveyor of "half-truths." Results indicated the majority of the texts presented highly ambiguous views of the relationship of public relations to advertising, the history and development of persuasive communication, and the nature of public relations in general. Some of the major problems were in the description of public relations and of how public relations operates. Only four of the texts dealt with the functions and duties of the public relations practitioner. For the others, public relations was either a shrouded activity or the mere generation of publicity. Only two texts mentioned the public relations professional organization and correctly identified the concept of accreditation. Public relations trends are identified as increased professionalism and increased reliance upon modern research and communication tools. The issues centered on ethics and the reputation of public relations practitioners. Most of the books presented public relations as a prostitute profession. Students are shown the public relations practitioner as a posturing flack deceiving, pushing, and employing techniques that run the gamut from handouts to junkets, from press conferences to bribes, with one ultimate goal: to control the content of the media. (HOD)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS DIVISION

THE FEAR OF LYING: EXAMINING A SOURCE OF BIAS FOR PR STUDENTS IN AN ETHICS COURSE

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Presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism, Annual Convention
Athens, Ohio, July, 1982

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INTRODUCTION

A 1981 study by the Professional Freedom & Responsibility Committee of the Public Relations Division of A.E.J. surveyed division members about the "primary ethical concern(s)" of their students.[1] While the most frequent response involved relationships with employers or clients, "the second most frequently mentioned concern involved deliberate distortion of information." The study cited such concerns as:

"deception in news releases--half-truths rather than full-truths..."

"they will be asked to lie"

"...placing positive images ahead of truth"

Apparently, students in PR are concerned about ethics and too often equate public relations with dishonesty. Certainly something must be done to alter these attitudinal biases.

While a course in PR ethics would deal with such misapprehensions, the coverage is often superficial. In addition, very little emphasis is allocated to examining the major sources which seemingly solidify these misconceptions. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine critically one source which frequently exposes students to the concept of the PR "flack" as a purveyor of "half-truths." Such a source is the textbook used in introductory mass media courses.

How can students come to grips with the ethics of a practitioner, when on the introductory level they are warned that:

> ...PR is dangerous. Publicists do not often lie, but telling half the truth is an integral part of their business, and stretching the truth is not uncommon. Moreover, they do it in secret; their work does not carry the unspoken caveat emptor of paid advertising.[2]

> Idealistic journalists look down their noses at people who "prostitute" their media skills in the interest of a client, rather than use them for the public good.[3]

> The very term "public relations counselor" suggests the status seeking that led undertakers to call themselves morticians, janitors to call themselves maintenance engineers, and garbage collectors to call themselves sanitary haulers.[4]

> Many turn to the PR specialist whose prime function is obtaining that space free of charge. (An extreme example of free media coverage happens when fringe political groups kidnap or assassinate well-known people just to focus media attention on their concerns.)[5]

These quotes, from introductory mass communications textbooks, are sadly representative of the bias and ignorance about PR which permeates the literature in this field. The majority of the books studied reflected the view that PR is unethical.

A review of major introductory mass communications books shows a fierce anti-public relations stance. Even acknowledgement of the existance of PRSA, of professional codes of ethics, or of a few honest practitioners does little to counter such a view. While there are a few notable exceptions, most of the required textbooks used by students in introductory classes thus present a somewhat negative indoctrination to public relations.

METHOD

For this study, the authors analyzed nine textbooks in mass communications, eight of which were published since 1978. In addition, three books of selected readings were examined. These sources were as follows:

John Bittner, Mass Communication: An Introduction (Prentice-Hall, 1980)

Charlene Brown, Trevor R. Brown and William Rivers, The Media and the People (Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1978)

Mary B. Cassata and Malefi J. Asanta, Mass Communication: Principles and Practices (MacMillan, 1979)

Melvin DeFleur and Everette Dennis, Understanding Mass Communication (Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

Fred Fedler, An Introduction to the Mass Media (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978)

Ray Eldon Hiebert, Donald Ungurait and Thomas Bohn, Mass Media II (Longman, 1979)

Don R. Pember, Mass Media in America (SRA, 1981)

Peter M. Sandman, David Rubin and David B. Sachsman, Media: An Introductory Analysis of American Mass Communications (Prentice Hall, 1976)

Edward Jay Whetmore, Mediaamerica: Form, Content and Consequence of Mass Communication (Wadsworth, 1979)

Robert Atway, Barry Orton and William Verterman, eds., American Media: Industries and Issues (Random House, 1978)

Michael Emery and Ted Curtis Smythe, Readings in Mass Communications: Concepts and Issues in the Mass Media (William C. Brown, Co., 1980)

Alan Wells, Mass Media and Society (Mayfield, 1979)

RESULTS

The majority of the texts presented highly ambiguous views of the relationship of PR to advertising, the history and development of persuasive communication and the nature of PR in general. Some major problems appear in the descriptions of what PR is and how it operates.

a. Functions and duties:

Only four of the texts deal with the functions and duties of the PR practitioner. DeFleur turns to Cutlip and Center for the four basic steps in a PR program, and Hiebert lists eight PR functions from the PRSA guide, Careers in Public Relations. In Fedler's text, corporate PR activities are discussed, while Pember offers a description of PR functions by Carl Byoir and Associates.

For the others, PR is either a shrouded activity or the mere generation of publicity. Brown is particularly vague, writing first that "a few advertising and PR people have confessed in their memoirs that they did work they detested for money they didn't earn to buy things they didn't need to impress people they didn't like."[6] Later, the text quotes Martin Mayer, author of Madison Avenue, U.S.A.:

> Public relations works behind the scenes; occasionally the hand of the p.r. man can be seen shifting some bulky fact out of sight, but usually the public relations practitioner stands at the other end of a long rope which winds around several pulleys before it reaches the object of his invisible tugging.[7]

When he does emerge from the shadows, the PR practitioner's job, for most authors, is "to supply the media with one-sided information that masquerades as objective news."[8] PR is publicity, pure and simple. Sandman goes so far as to reprint the "Guide for Publicity Heads" provided by a suburban New Jersey weekly, including the deadline for all copy (Monday noon) and the office number (11) of the newspaper.

The role of public relations in opinion research, corporate planning, internal communication, and public affairs is absent.

b. Professional Organization and Accreditation:

Only two texts, Hiebert and DeFleur, mention PRSA and correctly identify the concept of accreditation; Cassante prints the PRSA Code of Ethics and two texts mention accreditation, but make it "mandatory" for all PRSA members.

c. Case studies:

Most of the books use examples of PR, stressing products or community action programs; however, publicity receives the heaviest emphasis. The most bizarre example of "PR" has to be DeFleur's analysis of the Ayatollah Khomeini's power struggle against the Shah as "a public relations program that worked even without the mass media."[9]

d. Trends and major issues:

The less negative authors identify PR trends as increased professionalism and increased reliance upon modern research and communication tools. The issues, generally, center around ethics and the reputation of PR practitioners. An article reprinted from Business Week in Emery uses interviews and data to examine the role of PR in current corporate structures.

The majority of books fear the growing power of PR in corporate America and worry that journalists are heeding the siren song of news releases. As Brown writes:

> It is a measure of the importance of PR in the modern economy that public relations specialists are holding scores of corporate vice presidencies and that many are serving as company directors. The atmosphere has proved so heady that PR people speak increasingly of their 'profession' and its fast-developing 'prestige'....There is reason to doubt this sweeping role and even more reason to question some of the methods of modern PR.[10]

However, only six pages later, Brown writes that "the journalist's professed disdain for PR is, for the most part, no more than hypocritical posturing. Most journalists acknowledge that the honest practice of PR...is an invaluable service."[11]

Whether the complaints of journalists are "hypocritical posturing" or not, the common echo in the texts is the resentment of reporters for their former colleagues who have "sold out" to the higher paying PR jobs. Whetmore states that "competent reporters who leave journalism for PR can expect an immediate salary increase of 25 percent or so."[12] No source is given for the figure. Brown states that "today, journalists, from whose ranks many public relations specialists are recruited, tend to look down on [PR practitioners] -- perhaps a little out of envy of their higher salaries, perhaps much more in disdain of their 'selling out to higher interests.'"[13]

Sometimes, the contempt is from a feeling of manipulation by skilled flacks. Whetmore even provides the AP managing editor's guidelines to define a "flack," debates whether PR's relationship with the media is "parasitic" or merely "symbiotic," relates that "some contend that those in PR are 'hype artists' who will stop at nothing to get their clients favorable publicity," and dismisses PR practitioners' complaints against journalists as "a matter of debate."[14]

Sandman, as earlier quoted, worries about the half-truth and the stretching of the truth, which are integral parts of PR, and the fact that the government has yet to regulate the industry. With a nearly audible sigh, he concludes that "advertising and public relations have been around too long to be eliminated now."[15]

e. Expressed Attitudes:

Most of the aforementioned quotes have been negative; this study concluded that a negative bias predominates in the majority of the textbooks. The books of readings were the hardest to judge: Emery's pieces are strongly pro-PR (one was a defense of PR reprinted from PR Journal), while Wells and Atwan ignore public relations completely.

A ranking of the remaining books in terms of "objectivity" is impossible using this methodology. An evaluation assertion analysis could reveal more precise attitudes, but for now a more subjective evaluation will have to suffice.

A minority of books take a balanced view, notably Hiebert and DeFleur. Neither ignores valid complaints against the unethical practitioner, while offering a view of an emerging professionalism and responsibility.

Most books castigate the journalists who falls into the trap of the PR flack, and some excuse him, for "the reporter is an much a victim /of PR skills/ as the rest of us."[16] Others "balance" their coverage of PR by citing a few good examples, followed by Nixon's Watergate "PR problem" or other examples of deceptive product publicity or descriptions of situations where the ethics were questionable.

Pember sums up the problem best:

> The profession is being judged unfairly, the "true" public relations practitioner argues. The newspapers and magazine press as a whole is not judged by the standards of The National Enquirer or The Police Gazette. Public relations practitioners argue that their field should not be evaluated by the behavior of gaudy publicists.[17]

Yet, that is precisely what most of these authors have done; students studying the mass media are presented PR as a prostitute

profession, one which includes terrorists, the Ayatollah and Richard Nixon. They are shown the PR practitioner as a posturing flack deceiving, pushing, and employing techniques which "run the gamut from handouts to junkets, from press conferences to bribes"[18] with one ultimate goal: "to control the content of the media."[19]

CONCLUSION

Why present such a bad image? Authors, traditionally schooled as journalists, perhaps inherited the anti-PR bias, and equated public relations with publicity and press agentry. The sources most frequently cited were Cutlip and Center, along with Bernays' Crystallizing Public Opinion, Simon's Public Relations and Newsom and Scott's This Is PR: The Realities of Public Relations. Still, with dismal regularity, the bias came through.

Although it is anguish for a PR instructor to read these texts, the problem rests in the potential impact upon the student. With one-fifth of the journalism students planning on a career in public relations and only 11 percent of them majoring in PR in 1980[20], a substantial number of students may go through a news editorial sequence and feel they have "sold out" to go into public relations. Moreover, such textbooks may perpetuate the antagonism between reporters and practitioners. If these authors represent what is being taught in mass communications courses, are the schools accurately representing public relations?

When students come into the ethics courses on an upper level, they bring with them some of the anti-PR bias, according to last year's survey. These intro courses, along with the instructors, may bear some of the responsibility for instilling

this feeling of public relations as a career just a bit better than prostitiution.

For the instructor, it would be foolish to ignore the bias in hopes that a semester ethics course (with a few days devoted to PR) could hope to overcome the students' concerns. Rather, it might be useful to confront the issue in class, perhaps relying upon these introductory texts as examples of the poor public image of public relations. Students might then examine and debate the opinions expressed by the authors, and come, with luck, to an understanding of some critical issues:

a. Why do students themselves express a fear that "they will be asked to lie"?

b. Why do journalists and journalism textbook authors have such contempt for the profession?

c. How can PR clean up its own image?

With some effort perhaps even the worst images implanted by these authors can be brought into the open and countered. At the very least, PR -- and journalism students -- need to be reminded that we're not <u>all</u> prostitutes, assassins and flacks.

References

[1]Linda Scanlan, "Report of Activities for 1980-81," unpublished report by the Professional Freedom & Responsibility Committee to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism, August 8, 1981.

[2]Peter M. Sandman, David M. Rubin, David B. Sachsman, Media: Introduction Analysis of American Mass Communications (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976) p. 367.

[3]Edward Jay Whetmore, Mediaamerica: Form, Content and Consequence of Mass Communication (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1979) p. 265.

[4]Charlene Brown, Trevor R. Brown, William Rivers, The Media and the People (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978) p. 384.

[5]Whetmore, p. 266.

[6]Brown, pp. 378-9.

[7]Ibid., p. 379.

[8]Sandman, p. 367.

[9]Melvin L. DeFleur, Everette E. Dennis, Understanding Mass Communication (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) p. 472.

[10]Brown, p. 386.

[11]Ibid., p. 392.

[12]Whetmore, p. 265.

[13]Brown, p. 384.

[14]Whetmore, p. 266.

[15]Sandman, p. 367.

[16]Ibid., p. 365.

[17]Don R. Pember, Mass Media in America (Chicago: SRA, 1981) p. 281.

[18]Sandman, p. 363.

[19]Ibid.